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A Conversation Analysis Approach to Dramatic

Stylistics in the Theater of the Absurd

荒诞派戏剧的戏剧文体会话分析

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Synopsis

The Theater of the Absurd, due to its specialty, is rarely studied. This present thesis intends to use of the theory of Conversation Analysis to criticize drama in the Theater of the Absurd. The play for study is *The Zoo Story*, the first play categorized as the Theater of the Absurd written by the American playwright, Edward Albee. It displays the general nature of the Theater of the Absurd as well as its own characteristics. The present analysis focuses on three extracts of the conversations, conducted among the two characters at the beginning of the play and near the end. The data are collected based on judgmental sampling, on the assumption that they are typical of the playwright's characterization and the theme of the play, which is the difficulty of communication and uselessness of human existence.

The present thesis attempts to prove that the turn-taking framework in conversation analysis, with some adaptation, can be applied to analyze the drama in the Theater of the Absurd. The analytical framework of the present study includes three parts: turn types, types of non-verbal turns and turn-taking patterns. Turn-taking patterns are further classified into seven items including number of turns, average turn length, skip-connecting, floor-holding strategies, interruption, silence and repetition. The three extracts selected from the play texts are analyzed in an explanatory and quantitative way. The notable features of the character's turn-length with or without the use of floor-holding strategies, turn-types, non-verbal turn types, and the frequency of the use of repetition, interruption and several forms of silence explicitly indicate the character relationship and the theme of the absurd in an objective way.

The present study shows that turn-taking analysis is effective to reveal the characters and their relationship in dramatic dialogue, that such analysis helps with the appreciation of character relationship, the plot development as well as the theme of the Theater of the Absurd from a new perspective. This thesis demonstrates that the revised framework of turn-taking analysis can serve as a supplement of literature appreciation.

It is hoped that the present paper will not only enable readers and analysts to evaluate and understand the Theater of the Absurd from a linguistic perspective but also enhance the research in the area of Conversation Analysis.

Key Words: turn-taking; the Theater of the Absurd; character relationship; theme

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摘 要

本文试图用会话分析的话轮转换系统理论分析荒诞派戏剧这一特殊戏剧流派的作品。基于先前学者们对戏剧文体分析的研究，特别是话轮转换分析框架的应用，本文论证这一框架稍改后适用于分析荒诞派戏剧的对话。从话轮转换的角度分析人物的对话，能够揭示戏剧中人物的性格特征、人物关系、情节发展以及荒诞的戏剧主题，并从一个全新的角度来欣赏剧本。

研究所用的数据以戏剧主题和人物关系发展为依据，选取美国剧作家爱德华·阿尔比《动物园的故事》中的三个片段进行具体详细的分析。该剧为美国第一部荒诞派戏剧，具有荒诞派戏剧的共同特性；同时，无论在主题还是结构方面又有其特性。

本文所采用的话轮转换系统分析框架包含三个部分：话轮类型、非语言性话轮类型和话轮转换模式。其中，话轮转换模式又进一步分为话轮数量、平均话轮长度、跳跃式衔接、话轮保持策略、打断、沉默和重复七个部分。通过在话轮转换系统框架下对人物对话进行量化的分析与阐释，客观体现了戏剧人物关系、戏剧情节的发展和荒诞性的戏剧主题，即人类存在的无意义，以及孤独而渴求无法实现的交流。

本文是从会话分析的话轮转换理论对荒诞派戏剧进行人物关系和主题分析的新尝试，它不仅为读者从语言学的角度欣赏评价荒诞派戏剧提供了一个模式，而且丰富发展了会话分析理论的应用领域。

关键词：话轮转换；荒诞派戏剧；人物关系；主题

Contents

Introduction.....	1
 Chapter One Overview of the Key Concepts Related to Dramatic Stylistics.....	4
1.1 Stylistics.....	4
1.2 Discourse Stylistics.....	5
1.3 Dramatic Stylistics.....	7
1.3.1 Definition.....	7
1.3.2 Previous Study of Dramatic Stylistics.....	7
 Chapter Two Turn-taking System in Conversation Analysis... ..	10
2.1 Conversation Analysis.....	10
2.2 Definition of Turns.....	10
2.3 Features of Turns.....	13
2.4 Definition of Turn-taking.....	17
2.5 The Significance of Turn-taking System.....	18
 Chapter Three A Revised Turn-taking Framework in Dramatic Stylistics.....	19
3.1 Frameworks of Turn-taking Analysis in Dramatic Dialogue.....	19
3.2 A Revised Framework of Turn-taking Analysis.....	21
3.2.1 Units of Conversation Description in the Study.....	22
3.2.2 Turn Types.....	23
3.2.2.1 Initiating Turn.....	23
3.2.2.2 Supporting Turn.....	23
3.2.2.3 Challenging Turn	23
3.2.3 Types of Non-verbal Turns.....	24
3.2.3.1 Initiating Non-verbal Turn.....	24

3.2.3.2 Supporting Non-verbal Turn.....	24
3.2.3.3 Challenging Non-verbal Turn.....	24
3.2.4 Turn-taking Patterns.....	24
3.2.4.1 Number of Turns.....	24
3.2.4.2 Turn Length.....	24
3.2.4.3 Skip-connecting.....	24
3.2.4.4 Floor-holding Strategies.....	24
3.2.4.5 Interruption.....	26
3.2.4.6 Silence.....	26
3.2.4.7 Repetition.....	26
Chapter Four A Brief Survey of the Theater of the Absurd.....	28
4.1 Brief Introduction of the Theater of the Absurd.....	28
4.2 The development of the Theater of the Absurd in America.....	30
4.3 Edward Albee's <i>The Zoo Story</i>	32
Chapter Five The Revised Framework of Turn-taking Analysis in The Zoo Story.....	34
5.1 Data Collection.....	34
5.2 Analysis of Extract One	34
5.3 Analysis of Extract Two.....	45
5.4 Analysis of Extract Three.....	55
5.5 Analysis of Character Relationship and the Theme of <i>The Zoo Story</i> ...	64
Conclusions.....	67
Bibliography.....	70
Acknowledgements.....	73

目 录

引言.....	1
第一章 戏剧文体分析.....	4
1.1 文体学.....	4
1.2 话语文体学.....	5
1.3 戏剧文体学.....	7
1.3.1 定义.....	7
1.3.2 戏剧文体分析研究成果.....	7
第二章 会话分析的话轮转换系统.....	10
2.1 会话分析.....	10
2.2 话轮的定义.....	10
2.3 话轮的特征.....	13
2.4 会话转换的定义.....	17
2.5 话轮转换系统分析的意义.....	18
第三章 戏剧文体分析中的话轮转换系统分析框架.....	19
3.1 戏剧对话话轮转换分析框架.....	19
3.2 修订的话轮分析框架.....	21
3.2.1 话轮转换分析描述单位.....	22
3.2.2 话轮类型.....	23
3.2.2.1 起始话轮.....	23
3.2.2.2 配合话轮.....	23
3.2.2.3 阻碍话轮.....	23
3.2.3 非言语性话轮.....	24

3.2.3.1 非言语性起始话轮.....	24
3.2.3.2 非言语性配合话轮.....	24
3.2.3.3 非言语性阻碍话轮.....	24
3.2.4 话轮转换模式.....	24
3.2.4.1 话轮数目.....	24
3.2.4.2 话轮长度.....	24
3.2.4.3 跳跃式衔接.....	24
3.2.4.4 话轮保持策略.....	24
3.2.4.5 打断.....	26
3.2.4.6 沉默.....	26
3.2.4.7 重复.....	26
第四章 荒诞派戏剧概述.....	28
4.1 荒诞派戏剧概述.....	28
4.2 荒诞派戏剧在美国的发展.....	30
4.3 爱德华·阿尔比的《动物园的故事》.....	32
第五章 用话轮转换系统理论分析《动物园的故事》.....	34
5.1 语料收集.....	34
5.2 片段一分析.....	34
5.3 片段二分析.....	45
5.4 片段三分析.....	55
5.5 《动物园的故事》人物关系和主题综合分析.....	64
结论.....	68
参考书目.....	71
致谢.....	73

List of Tables

Table 3.1	Short's Turn-taking Patterns (1996)
Table 3.2	Li&Yu's Framework for Quantitative Turn-taking Analysis (2001)
Table 3.3	Cheng Jing's Quantitative Discourse Analysis Framework (2002)
Table 3.4	Revised Framework for Turn-taking Analysis
Table 5.1	Turn-taking Analysis of Extract One
Table 5.2	Turn-taking Analysis of Extract Two
Table 5.3	Turn-taking Analysis of Extract Three

Introduction

Stylistics is a linguistic approach to the study of literary texts. It rests on the assumption that the theories and methods developed within linguistics can be appropriately and fruitfully applied to the study of literature. With the advances of different schools of linguistics, stylistics is classified into different schools, i.e. formal stylistics, functional stylistics and discourse stylistics. Among them, discourse stylistics is based on the theories of discourse analysis, pragmatics and textual linguistics and dramatic stylistics refers to the stylistic study of dramatic texts by applying discourse analysis theories and methods.

As one of the linguistic analytical models for discourse stylistics, Conversation Analysis is developed by ethnomethodologists originally for the naturally occurring conversations. By analyzing detailed transcripts of authentic ordinary speech events, it gives the conversational interaction architectural design. Turn-taking system is the basic mechanism put forward by Sacks and Schegloff etc, who created the “turn-taking model”, which is composed of the turn-constructive component, the turn-allocation component and some rules. A turn is the utterance unit in turn-taking system as well as the basic constructive unit in daily conversation. Fourteen features are summarized by Sacks, including turn size, turn length, turn number, turn transitions, turn orders, turn allocation techniques and repair mechanisms etc. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the turn-taking analysis was mainly adopted to investigate the dialogues between students and teachers. In the 1980s, with the development of dramatic stylistics, turn-taking analysis was found to be useful and feasible in analyzing conversations in literature with two assumptions: 1) that the turn-taking patterns have general connection with conversational power and can reveal the power relationship and personality of characters; 2) that the writers create dialogues for their characters based on the same rules governing everyday social interaction.

Based on the previous researches, the present writer has proposed a revised framework of turn-taking mechanism for analysis of the Theater of the Absurd, with *The Zoo Story* as the focus of research. The turn-taking framework consists of three parts: turn types,

types of non-verbal turns and turn-taking patterns. Turn-taking patterns are further classified into seven items including number of turns, average turn length, skip-connecting, floor-holding strategies, interruption, silence and repetition. The floor-holding strategies are further subdivided into six items, namely, pre-sequence, space-making strategies, paralinguistic features, utterance incompletor, incompleteness marker and pre-structuring.

As mentioned, the school of the play on which the present study focuses is the Absurd drama, or the drama belonging to the Theater of the Absurd. It is a special kind of discourse in the literary genre of drama. The philosophical foundation of the Theater of the Absurd is existentialism, which holds that the world is irrational, and human existence absurd that the only destiny of human existence in the dangerous and alien world is a series of failures, and that the world is meaningless. To show the irrationality and absurdity of the world, the drama can hardly be expected to resolve impossible situations logically, and their structure is designed to reinforce the theme of hopelessness and meaninglessness by its very lack of the traditional pattern which presupposes, however unconsciously, meaning in life. The data for the present analysis is taken from *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee, generally regarded as the first absurd play written by American playwrights. The realism of its dialogue and Americanized subject matter, as well as its common theme of the absurdist drama, make the analysis of the play worthwhile.

As a thorough analysis of the whole drama is redundant and impossible, the present writer follows the rule of judgmental sampling in which specific units are included after the examination and judgment of the population. In the present paper, conversations to be collected for data analysis are judged as representative in terms of theme and development of relationship among characters. Thus, conversations chosen for analysis in the present paper are those that best reveal personalities and relationship among characters, unique writing features of the playwright as well as the theme of the play.

The present study is targeted to be a complement to the dramatic stylistics through the approach of turn-taking analysis. It aims to prove that the turn-taking analysis framework used by Short, Li Huadong & Yu Dongming in their previous studies can

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